MEETING REPORT
InterAction Forum 2004
Workshop on the Role of Civil Society in Peace-building and Conflict Mitigation
Notes on a Panel Presentation by USAID/CMM Director Elisabeth Kvitashvili
May 19, 2004

INTRODUCTION

Civil or internal conflict affects nearly 2/3 of the countries where USAID works, and there is growing demand – from Missions and partners – that USAID officers begin to think more strategically about how to address the causes and consequences of widespread deadly violence as well as develop and carry out better practices.

Speaking at a Forum panel on the role of civil society in peace-building and conflict mitigation, Elisabeth Kvitashvili, the director of USAID's new Office of Conflict Management and Mitigation, said CMM has been given the mandate to serve as a change agent for the Agency – to help Missions, development officers, and partners develop the expertise they need to work more effectively in high risk environments before, during and after conflict occurs. While USAID will not say it can prevent violence, it believes it can as an Agency use its resources more effectively to reduce the potential for violence or a return in violence. USAID's interventions must stop addressing just the symptoms of conflict – refugee flows, famine, and ethnic riots – and instead focus interventions at the causes of or factors leading to violence.

Kvitashvili said civil society has been, and will continue to be, a key partner in managing and mitigating violence in many parts of the world and discussed ways in which civil society groups can contribute to conflict management and peace-building. She also provided some examples of places where civil society groups have been extremely effective. However, Kvitashvili also noted the limitations of relying too heavily on civil society groups in peace-building and conflict mitigation efforts, an issue she said does not always receive the attention it deserves.

CIVIL SOCIETY AND CONFLICT MITIGATION

Kvitashvili said the first and perhaps most obvious contribution that civil society can make is through activities that focus explicitly on conflict – for example, conflict analysis, early warning, mediation and negotiation, and peace-advocacy. The range of groups that can contribute to this includes peace NGOs, faith-based organizations and business groups. To date, the vast majority of donor funding to civil society groups has gone to this type of activity and with good reason.

In many places, governments are unwilling or unable to devote resources to these efforts and by default, civil society has taken the lead. In other places, civil society groups, because of their ties to local communities or their legitimacy, are better positioned than other actors to monitor risk factors or mediate local disputes.

Kvitashvili mentioned a few of many examples of civil society activity in this area.

In terms of early warning, USAID is supporting the West Africa Peace-building Network, a coalition of some 300 civil society groups that are developing an early warning system for the war-torn West African region. Similarly in East Africa, the CEWARN civil society network monitors critical risk factors in the Karamojong and Somali clusters on the border regions of Uganda, Kenya, Sudan, Somalia, and Ethiopia. An innovative part of both efforts is that the information from both networks is then fed into regional response mechanisms – ECOWAS in West Africa and IGAD in East Africa.

In terms of analysis and peace advocacy, civil society groups in Sri Lanka partnered with the local business community to sponsor a very effective pro-peace media campaign that spelled out in concrete dollar terms what the country was losing in terms of economic growth and investment because of the instability. International Alert is exploring whether a similar civil society/private sector partnership approach can work in Nepal. Finally, civil society groups are often extremely well positioned to support mediation and conflict resolution efforts, particularly at the local level. In Nigeria, an inter-faith group in the north that was founded by a Muslim Imam and a Christian pastor has played a key role in dampening religious disputes in that region.

CIVIL SOCIETY AND CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

While she said direct work on conflict is important, Kvitashvili indicated CMM is also concentrating its efforts on 'mainstreaming' or integrating conflict into development assistance. Many of the most important long-term causes of violence such as a stagnant economy, widespread unemployment, corrupt political institutions, or competition over natural resources already lie squarely at the heart of traditional assistance.

However, although development and humanitarian assistance programs are increasingly implemented in situations of open or latent conflict, most still do not explicitly incorporate a sensitivity to conflict in their design or execution, which means that many local and international USAID implementing partners aren't either. So another very important area for engaging civil society is to bring them into efforts to 'mainstream' conflict into other development sectors. CMM is working with InterAction to develop a joint effort in this regard.

The impetus for this is not just coming from Washington or international donors, Kvitashvili said. CMM is hearing more and more from local conflict partners that they've had enough conflict trainings, have done enough analysis, and have the capacity in place to mediate individual disputes that arise. They say that what is still missing is the capacity to link conflict work to development work that addresses the problems and issues that surface through these efforts.

Kvitashvili cited the example of an inter-faith group in Northern Nigeria, which has identified youth unemployment, a lack of good public education, and the growth of radical Islamic education as a major factor influencing the potential for violence in the area. She opined that they also have very good ideas about how to integrate issues such as tolerance training into education and employment initiatives.

However, many of the civil society groups USAID works with on employment and education initiatives in Nigeria have no conflict background and are not always clear on how their work links to conflict objectives. Kvitashvili said helping local civil society groups working in "conflict-relevant" sectors such as economic growth, natural resource management, and education understand how their work is relevant to conflict management and finding ways to link their activities to the efforts of conflict resolution partners is therefore critical.

CIVIL SOCIETY AS A "BRIDGING" INSTITUTION

At the deepest, but perhaps most important level, Kvitashvili said civil society groups can help manage the potential for violence by acting as 'bridging institutions' or positive social capital in deeply divided societies

A study conducted by Ashutosh Varshney of urban violence in India found that the critical difference between areas that experienced violence and those that did not was the existence of formal institutions – trade associations, unions, peace committees, parent-teacher associations – that crossed lines of ethnic division. Not only did these institutions provide a neutral forum for discussing and resolving tensions at an early stage, but they fostered a sense of common purpose and were able to bring pressure to bear on elites who were turning to ethnic and religious extremism in order to mobilize political support.

In many parts of the developing world, civil society groups tend to mirror social and political fault lines. Kvitashvili said programs that bring different groups together around concrete activities such as small business development, building schools and clinics, improving the quality of education, or developing regional markets are a direct and powerful way to illustrate shared interests and counter those groups and individuals that are promoting more intolerant and exclusive rhetoric.

In working with civil society groups in deeply divided societies, donors therefore need to be attentive to how civil society is either reinforcing or bridging lines of division. This will often entail looking beyond civil society actors who are "approved" by the state to those who represent voiceless sectors.

Kvitashvili said she was told by a team USAID sent to Burundi recently that civil society networks that the agency has built during pre-election periods some time in the past were the "infrastructure" by which much of the genocidal killings took place. Civil society was much better organized – an achievement that made mass killings possible. Hence Kvitashvili cautioned that not only is civil society not always a solution, but programs to strengthen them in fragile settings need to be viewed with caution.

Donors should give particular consideration to locating and supporting organizations that cross ethnic, economic, or political fault lines such as women's groups or community development associations that explicitly engage members of different communities in order to address common problems, Kvitashvili said.

THE LIMITATIONS OF CIVIL SOCIETY

In discussing some limitations of working with civil society, Kvitashvili said she did not want to suggest that civil society isn't an important partner. She added that the preceding examples show very clearly that it is. However, she indicated she believes many donors and implementing partners have not thought very carefully about some of the limitations or negative aspects of working with civil society groups on conflict issues, and stressed the importance of having a good understanding of both strengths and weaknesses.

First, Kvitashvili commented that in the past there has been a fairly uncritical acceptance of the idea that civil society is a positive force for peace building. She emphasized the importance of recognizing that civil society is often a reflection of society rather than something entirely distinct, and while many groups can represent a positive force for change, many others can mirror the social ills and tensions that exist in a particular context. Before engaging with civil society, Kvitashvili said donors and implementing partners need to conduct a careful analysis of how civil society groups line up along a society's fault lines and they need to confirm they are indeed representative. She cautioned that even NGOs explicitly devoted to peace-building can reflect divisions in surprising and potentially damaging ways. Kvitashvili cited the example of a peace-building NGO in eastern Sri Lanka that worked extremely hard to hire both Tamils and Sinhalese and to build tolerance and respect for difference in their programs and among their staff. However when the cease-fire was signed, the central line of division in the east shifted from Tamil-Sinhalese to Tamil-Muslim, and clashes between Muslims and others in the area escalated. Not only were there no Muslims on staff in a region where Muslims are a significant portion of the local community, but attitudes in the NGO toward the Muslim community were openly hostile. Kvitashvili used this example to illustrate the point that even civil society groups explicitly devoted to peace can undermine it in certain contexts.

Second, Kvitashvili urged caution to ensure that civil society efforts do not undercut the state's ability to manage violence by creating parallel structures in civil society. In places where there is no political will on the part of the state to take up these tasks, then working with civil society is an important intervention. In other places, the government is behind the violence, and so civil society is the only force dedicated to peace. However, Kvitashvili argued that in many places there is support for peace in different pockets and at various levels of government, it just isn't all that easy to see. There may also be strong support for conflict management, but a lack of understanding about what it can do to more effectively manage violence. Even in these places, she said donors often still turn to civil society because they've learned to say the right things about conflict or it's easier to spot the organizations that are committed to peace -- but they may not know what they're doing.

Finally, Kvitashvili emphasized the need to be very clear about how much can be expected from civil society groups. She said civil society has been thrust to the forefront of attempts to deal with violence in many countries. However, it is important to remember that they didn't cause the violence and so ultimately they cannot stop the violence, at least not on their own, especially since the have no authority. And so there is

a need to continue to find ways to engage the ‘bad’ actors and the spoilers as well as the ‘good’ civil society groups, and a need to find a way to strengthen the state institutions responsible for managing tension and violence, and a need to find better ways to deal with some of the underlying causes of violence like massive youth unemployment or competition over land.

Kvitashvili concluded by commenting that while support to civil society is an extraordinarily important component of any conflict strategy, these groups have been asked to carry far too heavy a burden in resolving a problem that they ultimately did not cause.